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ABSTRACT

This article describes high context messaging in Chinese English-language mass media. A case study analysis of said mass media, during the 1996 Taiwan sovereignty/reunification controversy related to People's Liberation Army exercises in the Taiwan Straits, is done as a means of focusing on one singular event. The exercises were staged to dampen the first-ever Taiwanese presidential elections on March 23. "China Daily," the government-owned and government-controlled English language newspaper, is studied as a representative mass media channel (being inclusive of China Radio International and China Central Television newsreporting topics). The author was in China during the aforementioned military exercises. Contains 13 references. (Author/RS)

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HIGH CONTEXT MESSAGING IN CHINESE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE MASS MEDIA: A CASE STUDY

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HIGH CONTEXT MESSAGING IN CHINESE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE MASS MEDIA: A CASE STUDY

This article describes high context messaging in Chinese English-language mass media. A case study analysis of said mass media, during the 1996 Taiwan sovereignty/reunification controversy related to People's Liberation Army exercises in the Taiwan Straits, is done as a means of focusing on one singular event. The exercises were staged to dampen the first-ever Taiwanese presidential elections on March 23. China Daily, the government owned and government controlled English language newspaper, is studied as a representative mass media channel (being inclusive of China Radio International and China Central Television newsreporting topics). The author was in China during the aforementioned military exercises.

HIGH CONTEXT MESSAGING IN CHINESE
ENGLISH-LANGUAGE MASS MEDIA: A CASE STUDY

All communication can be placed on the low context-high context continuum. Low context messages are those messages that are directly stated and draw their meanings from literal statements. Receivers do not need situational context to accurately interpret intended message meaning. An example of a low context message is "Can I borrow $5? I forgot to bring money for lunch". The message is low context because the receiver has a low need to focus on the situational context. The message is clear. The speaker wants to borrow $5. for lunch.

A high context message draws much of it's meaning from the situational context within which the message is conveyed. Consideration of literal statements is not enough for the receiver to accurately perceive the sender's message. A high context message, for the aforementioned message example, might be for the speaker to present the following meaning. "Silly me, I've gotten so forgetful lately. I even forgot to bring my lunch money today. I've got too much on my mind today I suppose. Lunch isn't really that important though. The hunger pains will do me well as a constant reminder that I should not be so forgetful. This will be a meaningful lesson because I missed breakfast this morning as well".

The message conveying that the speaker wants to borrow $5. for lunch is presented in a high context manner. It is not explicitly stated. Rather, a general idea is presented

(or, some might say, a picture is painted) that portrays the speaker as being hungry because he/she forgot to bring money for lunch. The high context listener can logically conclude that the problem can be averted with little difficulty by lending the speaker five dollars.

Each world culture fits on the low-context-high context communication continuum. That is, each culture can be classified as low context, high context, or somewhere in between. Some of the more low context cultures include Switzerland, Germany and the U.S. Some of the more high context cultures include China, Japan and other Asian cultures. Thus, the U.S. citizen **tends** to present meanings in a direct literal manner and the Chinese person **tends** to present meanings in a less direct abstract manner. It is essential to remember these low context-high context cultural perspectives are generalizations. They will not apply with all people in all situations in a given culture.

This low context-high context communication distinction exists on the interpersonal, group, organizational, and mass levels. That is, cultures that communicate high context messages on the interpersonal level will also communicate in a high context manner on the mass media level. This article describes high context messaging in Chinese English-language mass media. A case study analysis of said mass media, during the 1996 Taiwan sovereignty/reunification controversy related to People's Liberation Army exercises in the Taiwan Straits, is done as a means of focusing on one singular event. The

exercises were staged to dampen the first-ever Taiwanese presidential elections on March 23, 1996.

In March, 1996 U.S. News & World Report printed a story that began:

> A map of Taiwan suddenly filled the screen during the Chinese television news one evening last week. As a somber announcer began to read latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates of missile tests near Taiwan, a red box appeared on the map at the northeast tip of the island to mark one target zone. A second red box appeared southwest of the island. As the announcer read on, the boxes began flashing angrily. (Lawrence and Palmer, 1996, p. 53)

This author, like millions of Chinese citizens, saw this report as he ate dinner in Beijing (the capital of China).

He was in China during the period of the Chinese military exercises, held in the Taiwan Straits, and used this opportunity to gather representative high context messaging data conveyed in English-language mass media. It was his sixth visit to China, where he has been a visiting professor at a Beijing university during five of those visits.

The Chinese government uses three government owned and government controlled media channels to convey messages to English speaking foreigners (including U.S. citizens) that are in China. These channels are newspaper, television, and radio. China Central Television (C.C.T.V.) broadcasts English language news Monday through Friday at 9 a.m., 4 p.m. and 11 p.m. on channel 9. Each news report is about 15 minutes in length. China Radio International (C.R.I.) broadcasts English news periodically throughout the day on 91.5 F.M. Each news report lasts about ten minutes.

China Daily is an English language newspaper that is published six days a week (Monday through Saturday). It typically consists of about eight pages and is "China's national English language newspaper" ("China Daily", China Daily, 1996, p. 4). It began publication in June, 1981. The main office is in Beijing and there are seven regional offices throughout China.

Between February 21-March 18, 1996 the author listened to C.R.I. radio news each day, watched C.C.T.V. news each day it was broadcast, and read China Daily six days a week. He analyzed the broadcasts and newspaper reports for information that conveyed representative references to U.S. credibility and intentions regarding the Taiwan sovereignty/reunification controversy related to People's Liberation Army exercises in the Taiwan Straits. The most relevant period of reporting during this time frame was between March 6, when the military exercises were announced, and March 18.

Significant news information released by China Daily, C.R.I., and C.C.T.V. is controlled by the Xinhua News Agency. It is the central approving authority for news. Thus, significant news information conveyed on C.C.T.V. and C.R.I. is also reported in China Daily. Reporting in China Daily is more extensive that C.C.T.V. and C.R.I., because of it's newspaper format, so the author focused on collecting representative references from China Daily. Again, he did this with the knowledge that references made on C.C.T.V. and C.R.I. were also conveyed in China Daily (and the newspaper

references were typically more lengthy).

Thirty two articles were collected during the 27 day (February 21-March 18, 1996) time frame. This report will focus on representative articles from that collection, in chronological order, that exemplify the typical high context messaging found in the news reporting.

Two days before China announced the military exercises to be held in the Taiwan Straits, China Daily included an article about how "the U.S. failed to get wide international support as it had expected" ("Politics Behind Worsening . . .", China Daily, 1996, p. 4). The article, excerpted from People's Daily (the largest Chinese language newspaper), describes how the U.S. tried to promote international condemnation of Cuba for shooting down two U.S. civilian planes that flew in Cuban airspace, but the U.S. efforts failed. This depiction of U.S. international relations weaknesses is relevant in that it set the stage for stronger criticisms the Chinese government would level at U.S. foreign policy within two days.

On the same day (again, two days before China announced the military exercises), an article titled "China's Security Goals Do Not Pose A Threat To World, Analyst Says" was included in the editorial page. The article creates a context for the coming military exercises announcement by explaining "China is not and will never be a threat to either Western or Asian countries", "drawing strength from the continued purchasing of advanced military equipment from the

U.S., the separatists on the island (Taiwan) might pull further away from the motherland", and "If the U.S. stops its military sales to Taiwan, then it is certain that by 2010 the size of the Chinese military will be much smaller than the current level" (Yan, 1996, p. 4). A context is perpetuated that helps justify the coming military exercises.

On March 6, 1996 China Daily published a front page article titled "Missile Tests To Take Place In Sea Areas Near Taiwan", thus announcing the start of military exercises in the area around Taiwan. A map was included that showed the test areas. Shen Guofang, foreign ministry spokesperson explained "The tests will help improve the military competence of the People's Liberation Army" ("Missile Tests To . . .", China Daily, 1996, p. 1). More importantly though, the exercises blockaded two of Taiwan's major seaports (Taibei and Gaoxiong) and this sent a high context message to Taiwan that it should cease separatist activities (seeking sovereignty from China) or risk Chinese military intervention.

The day after military exercises began, Swedish foreign minister Lena Hjelm-Wallen was quoted as saying "Like other countries in the world, Sweden pursues a 'one-China' policy. That means we do not recognize Taiwan as an independent state and cannot have state-to-state relations with Taiwan" ("One China, Sweden Affirms", China Daily, 1996, p. 1). This article, hardly newsworthy in and of itself, is a high context message that conveys the impression the international

community does not honor Taiwan sovereignty, Sweden included.

On the same day, an article titled "Military Is Purely For Defence Purposes" stated "China's efforts to strengthen national defence and improve the quality of its army is purely for defence purposes" ("Military Is Purely . . .", China Daily, 1996, p. 2). The article, published on the eve of the start of military exercises off Taiwan, does not mention Taiwan. However, it is clearly a high context message intended to create the image the military exercises are related to a Chinese internal matter, thus implying Taiwan is part of China.

The next day (March 8), in a story about China's rejection of a U.S. report detailing human rights abuses in China, the military movements were again described as "A normal exercise designed to improve the military quality of the Chinese servicemen" (Xu, 1996, p. 1). Another article on the same day, about U.S. interference against Cuba, states "the U.S. wants to cook up the incident (regarding U.S. licensed pilots who were shot down over Cuban waters by the Cuban military) to convert the attitudes of the international community that generally takes compassion on the island . . . ." (Chen, 1996, p. 4). This is a high context message that indirectly draws parallels between U.S. interference against Cuba and U.S. interference against China, without mentioning China.

During the period of the military exercises, the U.S.

and China were also engaged in a disagreement dealing with U.S. criticisms of human rights violations in China. A very lengthy article (roughly 5500 words) appeared in the March 11 China Daily that compared human rights in China and the U.S. Some of the criticisms of the U.S. included "Compared with the U.S., the constitutional rights of Chinese citizens are much more extensive . . . . the Congress of the U.S. belongs to, is ruled by, and serves the interests of the rich . . . . slavery did not die out completely . . . . the top one percent of the population owns 40 percent of the country's wealth . . . . half of the American people are illiterate . . . . 15-25 percent of pregnant women are beaten" ("Human Rights in China and U.S. Compared", China Daily, 1996, p. 3). A high context effect of this overall message is that since the U.S. is wrong in it's human rights record it is also probably wrong in it's support of Taiwan.

On March 13, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Shen Guofang discussed the U.S. Civil War as a high context parallel with the tensions between China and Taiwan. "At that time, the U.S. also opposed outside interference, stressed national sovereignty and territorial integrity and was strongly against the sale of arms by a certain European country to the south" (Xu, 1996, p. 1). The main message being that China, like the U.S. during the Civil War, opposes outside interference with it's internal affairs.

In an article the following day, about the Taiwan controversy, a high context veiled threat was presented in

the closing sentences of the article. "The reunification of the country is of vital importance to the Chinese people. To accomplish it, any cost might have to be justified" (Li, 1996, p. 4).

The strangest of the high context messages appeared on March 15 in an article titled "U.S. Urged To Reject Anti-China Proposal". The article begins "China urges the U.S. Government to 'take prompt and effective measures' to prevent the adoption of an anti-China bill in the House of Representatives" (Xu, 1996, p. 1) and it goes on to describe how the anti-China bill will harm U.S.-China relations. What makes this article particularly high context is that it never mentions what the anti-China bill is or what course of action the anti-China bill proposes. This author could only speculate that the bill proposed U.S. military support to Taiwan if Taiwan was attacked by China.

On March 16 China Daily reported the initial military exercise had ended and it was deemed a success. The exercise goals are indicated, none of which involve Taiwan independence, but a high context message is abstractly conveyed in a following sentence that deals with "reunification of the motherland". "The exercise achieved the desired goals in training the armed forces, improving the cadres' organizing and command abilities, testing the achievements made in scientific research and reforms of training, they said. The two commanding officers stressed that the SAF (Second Artillery Force) would resolutely

implement the guidelines set in President Jiang Zemin's important speech, 'Continue To Promote The Reunification Of The Motherland' . . . ." ("Missile Tests Improve . . .", China Daily, 1996, p. 1). Reunification of the motherland is generally thought to include bringing Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao under the control of The People's Republic of China government.

In conclusion, this article has described high context messaging in Chinese English-language mass media. The China Daily newspaper was chosen for analysis because it's reporting is inclusive of the other two Chinese English-language mass media, C.R.I. (China Radio International) and C.C.T.V. (China Central Television). A case study analysis of said mass media, during the 1996 Taiwan sovereignty/reunification controversy related to the People's Liberation Army exercises in the Taiwan Straits, has been done as a means of focusing on one singular event. Thirty two China Daily articles were collected during the 27 day (February 21-March 18, 1996) time frame. This report focused on representative articles from that collection, in chronological order, that exemplified the typical high context messaging found in the news reporting.

Findings from this inquiry clearly evidence use of high context messaging in Chinese English-language mass media, using the China Daily newspaper as a representative mass media channel for analysis. The high context messaging found in Chinese English-language mass media parallels high context

communication norms found throughout Chinese society.

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